

May’s mantra works wonders with voters

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The Conservatives’ lead has grown to 19 points in a poll for *The Times* which shows Theresa May’s “strong and stable” mantra is leaving a mark on the public consciousness.

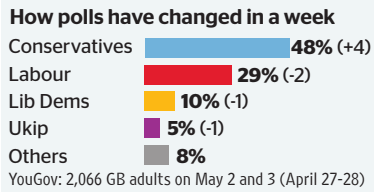
Mrs May enjoys an even bigger lead of 28 points when voters are asked whether she or Jeremy Corbyn would make the better prime minister.

YouGov asked 2,066 British adults on Tuesday and yesterday how they would vote in a general election if it were held tomorrow. The poll put the Conservatives on 48 per cent, up four points on the end of last week, with Labour on 29, down two points, Lib Dems on 10, down one, and Ukip on five, down one. The poll lead has grown from the 13-point gap at the end of last week but is not as big as the 24-point lead at the start of the campaign.

When asked to choose who would make the better prime minister, 49 per cent said Mrs May and 21 per cent said Mr Corbyn. Six per cent of Labour voters would prefer Mrs May along with 30 per cent of Lib Dems and 61 per cent of Ukip voters. Fifty-three per cent of people who voted Ukip in 2015 said they would vote for the Conservatives this time. People were asked to nominate, unprompted, any Conservative or

Labour campaign slogans they had heard in this election and 15 per cent replied “strong and stable”, Mrs May’s mantra, which she used 12 times on Sunday morning TV interviews. The other Tory slogan, “coalition of chaos” showed less sign of success and was chosen by just 2 per cent of voters, with Labour’s “many not the few” also chosen by 2 per cent.

More voters thought Labour had lots



of policies compared with the Tories, but Labour’s policies were seen as far less well thought-through.

The party has said it will introduce four extra bank holidays, vowed to hire 10,000 more police officers and promised a pay rise for NHS staff. Forty-three per cent of voters said Labour had lots of policies compared with 27 per cent who thought they had few, whereas 36 per cent of voters thought the Tories had lots of policies compared with 31 per cent who thought they had few. However, more than half of voters, or

53 per cent, did not think Labour’s policies were well thought-through compared with just 17 per cent of voters who did. Thirty per cent of voters said the Conservatives’ policies were well thought-through and 37 per cent said they were not.

Mrs May showed no sign of reducing her reliance on her core election slogans in her speech outside No10 yesterday. The prime minister used the phrase strong and stable twice while the word strong appeared in various forms nine times.

In an indication of the Conservatives’ desire to turn the general election into a straight contest between Mrs May and Mr Corbyn, the prime minister did not use the words Conservative, Conservatives, Tory or Tories in her 1,090-word speech. She did use the word me 12 times and asked the voters to “give me your backing” four times.

At campaign events, Mrs May has spoken in front of signs which did not mention the Conservatives, instead reading: “Theresa May: strong, stable leadership in the national interest.”

Yesterday, the Tories bought front-page advertisements in several local papers which also did not mention Mrs May’s party, instead calling on people to use their vote to “strengthen Theresa May’s hand”.

David Aaronovitch, page 25

Bombshell poster that backfired

The Conservatives’ first attack advert of the campaign attracted derision on social media

yesterday (Lucy Fisher writes). The poster, which features an image of the Labour leader alongside a missile with the words “more debt, higher taxes”, was captioned: “No bombs for our army, one big bombshell for your family”

It is understood that it was devised internally, despite rumours last week that M&C Saatchi was in talks to work for the party. It would not confirm whether Sir Lynton Crosby, the strategy guru credited with winning David Cameron a majority in 2015, had any input.

The advert was mocked online, with social media users sharing a series of memes, or versions of the original. One photograph of the Brexit secretary David Davis, far right, in front of the poster with Philip Hammond, the chancellor, was cropped so the advert featured only him. Its strapline read: “Hell for your family.”



CARL COURT/GETTY IMAGES

ITV vows to stage debate without two main leaders

Francis Elliott Political Editor

ITV is pressing ahead with plans for a debate between party leaders despite a renewed warning that neither Theresa May nor Jeremy Corbyn will take part.

Instead, a leaders’ debate on May 18 will include Tim Farron of the Liberal Democrats, the SNP’s Nicola Sturgeon, Ukip’s Paul Nuttall, Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru, and the Greens’ co-leader Caroline Lucas.

Yesterday the broadcaster appeared to rule out leaving empty chairs for the two main party leaders. A source said “we will have the right number of podiums for the people who are there”.

Without that threat, it seems improbable that the prime minister will change her mind and participate in a head-to-head debate with the Labour leader.

The BBC is expected to announce today that it will also hold a discussion between representatives of the main political parties, but will leave it to each party to decide whom to field.

The prime minister’s team have been negotiating this week with broadcasters over plans for a televised debate, but they have insisted that her opposition to taking part in a head-to-head encounter is “unwavering”.

Mr Corbyn’s team has said that he will take part in a debate if it is “between the only two people who could form the next government”, meaning that he too will be absent.

Leaders’ debates are often fraught with risk. David Cameron, who ignored advice to pull out of the contest in 2010, came to regret that decision when it handed Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader of the time, a platform.

Mrs May and Mr Corbyn have agreed to feature separately in a series of 30-minute programmes featuring profiles and interviews with the party leaders, ITV said.

There will also be debates between leaders in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Michael Jermey, ITV’s director of news and current affairs, said: “We have a strong record on organising debate programmes and giving viewers the chance to put their questions straight to the politicians.

“The *ITV Leaders’ Debate* moderated by Julie Etchingham and the debates in the nations will give viewers an opportunity to get answers.”

Both Mr Farron and Mr Nuttall have confirmed that they will take part in the debate on May 18.

A Liberal Democrat spokesman said: “Tim will be taking part in the debate and is looking forward to the opportunity to make the Liberal Democrat case. We believe this election is an opportunity to change the direction of our county.

“We expect our hard-Brexit opponents — Labour, Ukip and the prime minister, Theresa May — to all take part and make their opposing case. Otherwise, we expect ITV to empty chair them. Tim believes, in politics, you must have the courage of your convictions. Let’s see if May and Corbyn feel the same.”

A spokesman for Ukip said: “Mr Nuttall is delighted to be able to present Ukip’s positive vision for a UK that is free, prosperous, secure and at ease with itself and the world.

“It’s just a shame that Mrs May is too arrogant to present herself to the public for scrutiny and Mr Corbyn doesn’t trust himself not to become an even greater embarrassment in debate.”

RED BOX ELECTION COUNTDOWN

MATT CHORLEY

Full house•

Philip Hammond and David Davis endured a raucous press conference yesterday, when Tory election slogans were greeted with jeers of “Bingo!” The BBC’s James Landale revealed to Red Box how he told Tony Blair in 1997 about a press game of Battlebus Bingo. “I’ve never seen somebody look so distraught,” he said. “He couldn’t believe we were being so trivial.”

“Sometimes”

AN 18-YEAR-OLD VOTER, ASKED IF SHE KNEW WHO THE PRIME MINISTER WAS

Grilling politicians

Broadcasters must now give all parties a platform, and that means politicians getting up early to be shouted at by Piers Morgan on *Good Morning Britain*. Yesterday was David Davis’s turn. “We are going to roast him like a barbecue,” the host said. Acknowledging his oleaginous reputation, Mr Davis said: “I am a self-basting politician.”



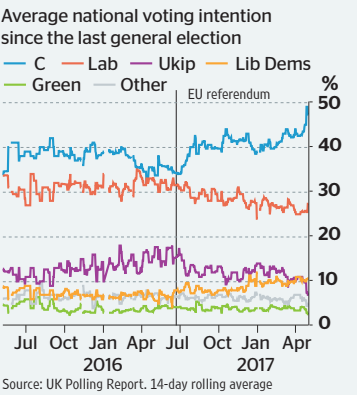
Many unhappy returns

Tim Farron did what no other party leader has yet managed: he met a member of the public in Kidlington who didn’t agree with him. Malcolm Baker, who turned 65 yesterday, voted for Brexit. Mr Farron asked him if he was proud his grandchildren would inherit a poorer country. A simple “happy birthday” would have sufficed.

Save the pound

Money is tight at Ukip after Arron Banks flounced off with his donor’s wallet. Romilly Weeks, of ITV, revealed that before a press conference yesterday, cameras were “not allowed in because Ukip hadn’t paid the bill for the room”.

Poll of polls



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Labour hopefuls aiming for Westminster

Paul Dadge
A former firefighter who helped victims of the 7/7 bombings in London has been selected to fight a West Midlands seat.

Paul Dadge, then 28, helped victims on July 7 2005 and a photograph, right, of him comforting an injured commuter, Davinia Turrell, became one of the enduring images of the day. It led to the IT worker being labelled a hero, although he subsequently objected to the description.

Mr Dadge, 40, right, has been selected to fight the Staffordshire seat of Cannock Chase, where Amanda Milling is defending her Conservative

majority of almost 5,000. He runs his own IT business, is married and has two young children.

Ellie Reeves
The 36-year-old employment law barrister and former Labour official is set to become the best-connected MP after being selected for the safe Labour seat of Lewisham West &



Penge in south London.

The outgoing MP, Jim Dowd, had a majority of 12,714 over the Conservatives. Ms Reeves, above, served as a member of Labour’s national executive committee for ten years and is vice-chairwoman of the party in London.

She also enjoys close family links to the party. Her sister Rachel won election for Leeds West in 2010. She has been tipped as a future leadership candidate.

Jeremy Newmark
The chairman of Jewish Labour will attempt to overcome a Conservative majority in Finchley & Golders Green. Mr



Newmark, 44, who chairs the Jewish Labour Movement, will seek to become MP for a constituency where 21.1 per cent of voters are Jewish.

Mr Newmark was among influential party members who wrote to a newspaper last month to condemn Labour’s decision not to expel Ken Livingstone for comments about Adolf Hitler and Zionism.

He has held high-profile roles within the Jewish community and is a former spokesman for Lord Sacks, the former chief rabbi.

Mike Freer has held the seat since 2010 and had a majority of 5,622 at the last election.

Tories call for education funding rethink

Henry Zeffman

Theresa May has been urged to rethink changes to school funding by a coalition of senior Conservatives.

In a sign that frustrated Tories are not willing to let the issue go quiet during the election campaign, more than a dozen of Mrs May’s candidates called on the prime minister to address the issue in the party’s manifesto.

Justine Greening, the education secretary, proposed a new funding formula for schools in December after MPs and councils across the country said they were treated unfairly. It aims to ensure similar schools in different areas of the country receive equivalent funds, but

schools in some areas stand to lose out as a result.

Graham Brady, chairman of the 1922 committee, called for changes to the proposals “in the near future”. Bob Blackman, who is standing for re-election in Harrow East, said the proposals were “unacceptable”, adding: “I have no control over what goes in the manifesto but I’m hoping it won’t be in there.”

Ed Vaizey, the former culture minister, said: “There are alternative proposals which the government needs to look at.” The former transport minister, Stephen Hammond, said: “Many London MPs including myself have made representations. I hope the manifesto will reflect these representations.”

Laurence Robertson, who is the Conservative candidate in Tewkesbury, said concern was not confined to London constituencies. “If the cake isn’t going to grow in the future then we have to look at how it is divided. My feeling is there is going to be some agreement made before we get to the manifesto.”

The issue was highlighted on the front page of the London *Evening Standard* in George Osborne’s second issue as editor, with the headline: “Tories: abandon school funding shake-up”. Though as chancellor Mr Osborne initiated moves to address regional disparities in funding, he raised concerns about Mrs May’s proposals as the MP for Tatton earlier this year.